



Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift 2017: Seeing Like a City
Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press

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Book Review: Amin, Ash and Nigel Thrift. 2017, *Seeing Like a City*. Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press.

Urban complexities have forced scholars to understand urbanization beyond the boundedness of socio-ecological dynamics in particular places. Many argue for a new ontology of planetary urbanization, looking at formations of cities as part of the whole (capitalist) spatial transformations integrating all geographical scales. Others criticize too-generalizing claim on global neoliberal restructuring power and encourage more research on different forms of city embodying diverse socio-spatial logics. While the global climate has been a significant (political) issue, many work on the global histories of capital in their interplays with the history of human species. *Seeing Like a City*, magnificently, speaks to all of these.

One might relate the book with 'seeing like a state', but not even once the authors cite James Scott or Warren Magnusson – the latter uses 'seeing like a city' to make sense 'the political' through the politics of urbanisms, arguing for a more realist approach rather than through the concept of state sovereignty. To Amin and Thrift, the dichotomy of seeing 'like a state' and 'like a city' is problematic because it keeps us from the very meaning of authority within the heterogeneous everyday life, carrying different possibilities of being and governing while pregnant with new possibilities of 'publics' and 'commons'. Understanding the urban ontology requires a grounded epistemology through, they propose, working on the politics of infrastructure.

The book is an assemblage of different topics in political economy, political ecology, innovation science, and more. It opens up discussions on matters that individually are not new, but it bridges all to bring a renewed attention to infrastructures. A prologue, five chapters, and an epilogue all together are accompanied by 26 impressive drawings that independently exist, deserving attention as much as the text ('Orientation' and 'Ten Thousand Households' are my favourites). My summary below shall explain the importance and significance of the book.

The epilogue problematizes the limits of our current knowledge to grasp complex relations of human and non-human agencies. To know cities with locally embedded yet multi-scalarly interlinked

infrastructures – physical networks, their operations and sustaining bureaucracies – means allowing equal narratives of both ‘designated’ and ‘lay’ experts.

Chapter one ‘Looking through the City’ stresses on the insufficiency of the inherited disciplines, to understand cities more than territorial formations, but as ‘combinatorial ecology’ with diverse juxtaposed hardware and software qualifying ‘the urbanicity’. Cities need to be understood by ‘developing situated forensic skills’ through diverse (scientific-artistic) tools and rationalities beyond computational intelligence (p. 25).

Chapter two ‘Shifting the Beginning’ argues for ‘the second Pangaea’ with the second nature of multiple infrastructural layers as the material cause of the geological era Anthropocene. The second nature is followed by the third that is ‘streams of (un)consciousness’ involving sorts of activities mediated by information and telecommunication infrastructures. The infrastructural natures lead to multi-scalar effects, anticipated and non-anticipated as well as spatial and non-spatial (also in chapter three). The authors invite us to think of a new humanity in this context.

Chapter three ‘How Cities Think’ continues on ‘different sense of human’, ‘as a composite of technical and earthly powers’ (p. 68-9). It questions whether cities embody ‘ruptures’ between human and the ‘pluriverses’ (instead of ‘a universe’), but also in what way cities unite them. Human’s extraordinary ability for social learning and environmentally sensitive skill to keep adapting are attributes of ‘humanity’ that in any way are varied and not static, like the cityness of city. But the humanity keeps extending its physical reach through whatever forms of technology. The authors invite us to imagine what after the Anthropocene, by thinking of infrastructure differently.

Chapter four ‘The Matter of Economy’ and Chapter five ‘Frames of Poverty’ discuss how infrastructural conditions regulate both growth and socioeconomic disparity. The presence of infrastructural ‘machine agencies’ of diverse ‘sociotechnical networks’ enable multiple spheres of economy. However, diverse ‘local’ knowledge remains unbridged or unrecognized.

Chapter four questions what agglomeration actually means for the economy. Overlays of infrastructure ‘affect local possibility in each economic circuit ... depending on its overall spatial dynamic’ and at the same time ‘the resonances of agglomeration are always mediated, folded into a wider force field’ (p. 102). They spell out the thesis of ‘meshwork urbanism’ pivoting on infrastructure as ‘urban commons’ and their collective agencies.

Chapter five begins by showing that 'there is not much consensus on whether world urban poverty is increasing or decreasing, or whether cities exacerbate or better the chances of the poor' (p. 127). It is then important to scrutinize the knowledge production on this matter and explore policy possibilities between the 'logics of calculation' and 'logics of experience'.

The epilogue highlights the rhizomatic characters of infrastructural cities. It appeals for new infrastructural governance that is open, multi-nature and based on grounded capabilities to connect in ways that different from 'the arborescent logic typical of state power' (p. 165).

The book is written eloquently but there is some incoherence, such as 'unplanned urban expansion' (p. 11) and 'incomplete' infrastructures in cities of the Global South (p. 108-10). The term unplanned does not make sense within their arguments on propagating effects of infrastructures, while incompleteness contradicts their propositions on heterogeneous state of cityness, and humanity. While spatiality of tangible-intangible infrastructural agencies and their indefinite possibilities of conjuncture are much discussed, a topic on temporal conjuncture is rather implicitly raised.

The book is written with dense sentences conveying different terms, without elaborated definitions. Very often, the authors shy away from pedagogical explanations to elaborate their overlaying concepts e.g. their claim of 'non-usual' political economy of human and non-human assemblages of the Anthropocene. The book offers speculative arguments, but without thoroughly reviewing any existing scholarship or deeply discussing any concrete empirical case that at least can show how their conceptual propositions could operate in researching a specific case.

Still, *Seeing Like a City* is essential to read. It is a call for us to transcend disciplinary boundaries. If the book were a painting, Amin and Thrift would paint with big brushes to picture a great object on a very large canvas that unfortunately is poor of coherent details. However, the brushes are interestingly crafted, performing impressive strokes (of multiple disciplines) for creating varying shapes (of empirical phenomena). It could be retouched by collective bodies of diverse artists.

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